Commentary

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

STENDHAL

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If I have so long delayed, in spite of its importance, in speaking of *[La Chartreuse de Parme]*, you must understand that it was difficult for me to acquire a sort of impartiality. Even now I am not certain that I can retain it, so extraordinary, after a third, leisurely and thoughtful reading, do I find this work.

I can imagine all the mockery which my admiration for it will provoke. There will be an outcry, of course, at my infatuation, when I am simply still filled with enthusiasm after the point at which enthusiasm should have died. Men of imagination, it will be said, conceive as promptly as they forget their affection for certain works of which the common herd arrogantly and ironically protest that they can understand nothing. Simple-minded, or even intelligent persons who with their proud gaze sweep the surface of things, will say that I amuse myself with paradox, that I have, like M. Sainte-Beuve, my *chers inconnus*. I am incapable of compromise with the truth, that is all.

M. Beyle has written a book in which sublimity glows from chapter after chapter. He has produced, at an age when men rarely *find* monumental subjects and after having written a score of extremely intelligent volumes, a work which can be appreciated only by minds and men that are truly superior. In short, he has written *The Prince up to date*, the novel that Machiavelli would write if he were living banished from Italy in the nineteenth century.

And so the chief obstacle to the renown which M. Beyle deserves lies in the fact that *La Chartreuse de Parme* can find readers fitted to enjoy it only among diplomats, ministers, observers, the leaders of society, the most distinguished artists; in a word, among the twelve or fifteen hundred persons who are at the head of things in Europe. Do not be surprised, therefore, if, in

the ten months since this surprising work was published, there has not been a single journalist who has either read, or understood, or studied it, who has announced, analysed and praised it, who has even alluded to it. I, who, I think, have some understanding of the matter, I have read it for the third time in the last few days: I have found the book finer even than before, and have felt in my heart the kind of happiness that comes from the opportunity of doing a good action.

Is it not doing a good action to try to do justice to a man of immense talent, who will appear to have genius only in the eyes of a few privileged beings and whom the transcendency of his ideas deprives of that immediate but fleeting popularity which the courtiers of the public seek and which great souls despise? If the mediocre knew that they had a chance of raising themselves to the level of the sublime by understanding them, *La Chartreuse de Parme* would have as many readers as *Clarissa Harlowe* had on its first appearance.

There are in admiration that is made legitimate by conscience ineffable delights. Therefore all that I am going to say here I address to the pure and noble hearts which, in spite of certain pessimistic declamations, exist in every country, like undiscovered pleiads, among the families of minds devoted to the worship of art. Has not humanity, from generation to generation, has it not here below its constellations of souls, its heaven, its angels, to use the favourite expression of the great Swedish prophet, Swedenborg, a chosen people for whom true artists work and whose judgments make them ready to accept privation, the insolence of upstarts and the indifference of governments?…

This is what happened to me. At the first reading, which took me quite by surprise, I found faults in the book. On my reading it again, the *longueurs* vanished, I saw the necessity for the detail which, at first, had seemed to me too long or too diffuse. To give you a good account of it, I ran through the

book once more. Captivated then by the execution, I spent more time than I had intended in the contemplation of this fine book, and everything struck me as most harmonious, connected naturally or by artifice but concordantly.

Here, however, are the errors which I pick out, not so much from the point of view of art as in view of the sacrifices which every author must learn to make to the majority.

If I found confusion on first reading the book, my impression will be that of the public, and therefore evidently this book is lacking in method. M. Beyle has indeed disposed the events as they happened, or as they ought to have happened; but he has committed, in his arrangement of the facts, a mistake which many authors commit, by taking a subject true in nature which is not true in art. When he sees a landscape, a great painter takes care not to copy it slavishly, he has to give us not so much its letter as its spirit. So, in his simple, artless and unstudied manner of telling his story, M. Beyle has run the risk of appearing confused. Merit which requires to be studied is in danger of remaining unperceived. And so I could wish, in the interest of the book, that the author had begun with his magnificent sketch of the battle of Waterloo, that he had reduced everything which precedes it to some account given by Fabrizio or about Fabrizio while he is lying in the village in Flanders where he arrives wounded. Certainly, the work would gain in lightness. The del Dongo father and son, the details about Milan, all these things are not part of the book: the drama is at Parma, the principal characters are the Prince and his son, Mosca, Rassi, the Duchessa, Ferrante Palla, Lodovico, Clelia, her father, the Raversi, Giletti, Marietta. Skilled advisers or friends endowed with simple common sense might have procured the development of certain portions which the author has not supposed to be as interesting as they are, and would have called for the excision of several details, superfluous in spite of their fineness. For instance, the work would lose nothing if the Priore Blanès were to disappear entirely.

I will go farther, and will make no compromise, in favour of this fine work, over the true principles of art. The law which governs everything is that of unity in composition; whether you place this unity in the central idea or in the plan of the book, without it there can be only confusion. So, in spite of its title, the work is ended when Conte and Contessa Mosca return to Parma and Fabrizio is Archbishop. The great comedy of the court is finished.…

If, beneath the Roman purple and with a mitre on his head, Fabrizio loves Clelia, become Marchesa Crescenzi, and if you were telling us about it, you would then wish to make the life of this young man the subject of your book. But if you wished to describe the whole of Fabrizio's life, you ought, being a man of such sagacity, to call your book *Fabrizio, or the Italian in the Nineteenth Century*. In launching himself upon such a career, Fabrizio ought not to have found himself outshone by figures so typical, so poetical as are those of the two Princes, the Sanseverina, Mosca, Ferrante Palla. Fabrizio ought to have represented the young Italian of to-day. In making this young man the principal figure of the drama, the author was under an obligation to give him a large mind, to endow him with a feeling which would make him superior to the men of genius who surround him, and which he lacks. Feeling, in short, is equivalent to talent. *To feel is* the rival of *to understand* as *to act is* the opposite of *to think*. The friend of a man of genius can raise himself to his level by affection, by understanding. In matters of the heart, an inferior man may prevail over the greatest artist. There lies the justification of those women who fall in love with imbeciles. So, in a drama, one of the most ingenious resources of the artist is (in the case in which we suppose M. Beyle to be) to make a hero superior by his feeling when he cannot by genius compete with the people among whom he is placed. In this respect, Fabrizio's part requires recasting. The genius of Catholicism ought to urge him with its divine hand towards the *Charterhouse of Parma*, and that genius ought from time to time to overwhelm him with the tidings of heavenly grace. But then

the Priore Blanès could not perform this part, for it is impossible to cultivate judicial astrology and to be a saint according to the Church. The book ought therefore to be either shorter or longer.

Possibly the slowness of the beginning, possibly that ending which begins a new book and in which the subject is abruptly strangled, will damage its success, possibly they have already damaged it. M. Beyle has moreover allowed himself certain repetitions, perceptible only to those who know his earlier books; but such readers themselves are necessarily connoisseurs, and so fastidious. M. Beyle, keeping in mind that great principle: "Unlucky in love, as in the arts, who says too much!" ought not to repeat himself, he, always concise and leaving much to be guessed. In spite of his sphinx-like habit, he is less enigmatic here than in his other works, and his true friends will congratulate him on this.

The portraits are brief. A few words are enough for M. Beyle, who paints his characters both by action and by dialogue; he does not weary one with descriptions, he hastens to the drama and arrives at it by a word, by a thought. His landscapes, traced with a somewhat dry touch which, however, is suited to the country, are lightly done. He takes his stand by a tree, on the spot where he happens to be; he shews you the lines of the Alps which on all sides enclose the scene of action, and the landscape is complete. The book is particularly valuable to travellers who have strolled by the Lake of Como, over the Brianza, who have passed under the outermost bastions of the Alps and crossed the plains of Lombardy. The spirit of those scenes is finely revealed, their beauty is well felt. One can see them.

The weak part of this book is the style, in so far as the arrangement of the words goes, for the thought, which is eminently French, sustains the sentences. The mistakes that M. Beyle makes are purely grammatical; he is careless, incorrect, after the manner of seventeenth-century writers.… In one place, a discord of tenses between verbs, sometimes the absence of a verb;

here, again, sequences of *c'est*, of *ce que*, of *que*, which weary the reader, and have the effect on his mind of a journey in a badly hung carriage over a French road. These quite glaring faults indicate a scamping of work. But, if the French language is a varnish spread over thought, we ought to be as indulgent towards those in whom it covers fine paintings as we are severe to those who shew nothing but the varnish. If, in M. Beyle, this varnish is a little yellow in places and inclined to scale off in others, he does at least let us see a sequence of thoughts which are derived from one another according to the laws of logic. His long sentence is ill constructed, his short sentence lacks polish. He writes more or less in the style of Diderot, who was not a writer; but the conception is great and strong; the thought is original, and often well rendered. This system is not one to be imitated. It would be too dangerous to allow authors to imagine themselves to be profound thinkers.

M. Beyle is saved by the deep feeling that animates his thought. All those to whom Italy is dear, who have studied or understood her, will read *La Chartreuse de Parme* with delight The spirit, the genius, the customs, the soul of that beautiful country live in this long drama that is always engaging, in this vast fresco so well painted, so strongly coloured, which moves the heart profoundly and satisfies the most difficult, the most exacting mind. The Sanseverina is the Italian woman, a figure as happily portrayed as Carlo Dolci's famous head of *Poetry*, Allori's *Judith*, or Guercino's Sibyl in the Manfredini gallery. In Mosca he paints the man of genius in politics at grips with love. It is indeed love without speech (the speeches are the weak point in *Clarisse)*, active love, always true to its own type, love stronger than the call of duty, love, such as women dream of, such as gives an additional interest to the least things in life. Fabrizio is quite the young Italian of today at grips with the distinctly clumsy despotism which suppresses the imagination of that fine country; but … the dominant thought or the feeling which urges him to lay aside his dignities and to end his life in a Charterhouse needs

development. This book is admirably expressive of love as it is felt in the South. Obviously, the North does not love in this way. All these characters have a heat, a fever of the blood, a vivacity of hand, a rapidity of mind which is not to be found in the English nor in the Germans nor in the Russians, who arrive at the same results only by processes of revery, by the reasonings of a smitten heart, by the slow rising of their sap. M. Beyle has in this respect given this book the profound meaning, the feeling which guarantees the survival of a literary conception. But unfortunately it is almost a secret doctrine, which requires laborious study. *La Chartreuse de Parme* is placed at such a height, it requires in the reader so perfect a knowledge of the court, the place, the people that I am by no means astonished at the absolute silence with which such a book has been greeted. That is the lot that awaits all books in which there is nothing vulgar. The secret ballot in which vote one by one and slowly the superior minds who make the name of such works, is not counted until long afterwards.…

After the courage to criticise comes the courage to praise. Certainly it is time someone did justice to M. Beyle's merit. Our age owes him much: was it not he who first revealed to us Rossini, the finest genius in music? He has pleaded constantly for that glory which France had not the intelligence to make her own. Let us in turn plead for the writer who knows Italy best, who avenges her for the calumnies of her conquerors, who has so well explained her spirit and her genius.…

M. Beyle is one of the superior men of our time. It is difficult to explain how this observer of the first order, this profound diplomat who, whether in his writings or in his speech, has furnished so many proofs of the loftiness of his ideas and the extent of his practical knowledge should find himself nothing more than Consul at Civita-vecchia. No one could be better qualified to represent France at Rome. M. Mérimée knew M. Beyle early and takes after him; but the master is more elegant and has more ease. M. Beyle's

works are many in number and are remarkable for fineness of observation and for the abundance of their ideas. Almost all of them deal with Italy. He was the first to give us exact information about the terrible case of the Cenci; but he has not sufficiently explained the causes of the execution, which was independent of the trial, and due to factional clamour, to the demands of avarice. His book *Del'amour is* superior to M. de Sénancour's, he shews affinity to the great doctrines of Cabanis and the School of Paris; but he fails by the lack of method which, as I have already said, spoils *La Chartreuse de Parme.…*

M. de Chateaubriand said, in a preface to the eleventh edition of *Atala*, that his book in no way resembled the previous editions, so thoroughly had he revised it. M. le Comte de Maistre admits having rewritten *Le Lépreux de la vallée d'Aoste* seventeen times. I hope that M. Beyle also will set to work going over, polishing *La Chartreuse de Parme*, and will stamp it with the imprint of perfection, the emblem of irreproachable beauty which MM. de Chateaubriand and de Maistre have given to their precious books.

Balzac's review of *The Charterhouse of Parma* was published in *Revue Parisienne*, September 25, 1840. In *Novelists on Novelists: An Anthology*, edited by Louis Kronenberger (Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1962).

STENDHAL: LETTER TO HONORÉ DE BALZAC

Yesterday evening, monsieur, I had a great surprise. I do not think that anybody has ever been so treated in a review, and by the best judge of the matter. You have taken pity on an orphan abandoned in the middle of the

street. I have responded worthily to such kindness: I received the review yesterday evening, and this morning I reduced the first fifty-four pages of the work whose worldly success you are so greatly fostering, to four or five pages.

The laborious kitchen of literature might well have given me a distaste for the pleasure of writing: I have postponed my hope of the satisfactions of authorship to twenty or thirty years hence. A literary botcher might then discover the works whose merit you so strangely exaggerate.…

Since you have taken the trouble to read this novel three times, I shall have a deal of questions to ask you at our first encounter on the boulevard:

> (1) Is it permissible to call Fabrice "our hero"? My object was to avoid repeating the name "Fabrice" too often.
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> (2) Should I omit the Fausta episode, which became too long in the course of writing? Fabrice seizes the offered opportunity of demonstrating to the Duchess that he is not susceptible of *love*.
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> (3) The fifty-four *first* pages seemed to me a graceful introduction. I did indeed feel some remorse whilst correcting the proofs, but I thought of Walter Scott's tedious first half-volumes and the long preamble to the divine *Princesse de Clèves*.

I abhor the involved style, and I must confess to you that many pages of the *Chartreuse* are published as originally dictated. I shall say, like a child: "I won't do it again." I believe, however, that since the destruction of the Court in 1792, form has daily played a more meagre part. If M. Villemain, whom I mention as the most distinguished of the academicians, were to translate the *Chartreuse* into French, he would take three volumes to express what has been presented in two. Since most rascals are given to over-emphasis and

eloquence, the declamatory tone will come to be detested. At the age of seventeen I almost fought a duel over M. de Chateaubriand's "the indeterminate crest of the forests," which numbered many admirers amongst the 6th Dragoons. I have never read *La Chaumière indienne*, I cannot endure M. de Maistre.

My Homer is the *Mémoires* of Marshal Gouvion Saint-Cyr. Montesquieu and Fénelon's *Dialogues* seem to me well written. Except for Madame de Mortsauf and her fellows, I have read nothing published in the last thirty years. I read Ariosto, whose stories I love. The Duchess is copied from Correggio. I see the future history of French letters in the history of painting. We have reached the stage of the pupils of Pietro de Cortone, who worked fast and indulged in violently exaggerated expression, like Mme. Cottin when she causes the ashlars of the Borromaean isles to "walk." After this novel, I did not.… Whilst writing the *Chartreuse*, in order to acquire the correct tone I read every morning two or three pages of the Civil Code.

Permit me to employ an obscenity. I do not wish to f——g the reader's soul. The poor reader lets pass such ambitious expressions as "the wind uprooting the waves," but they come back to him when the moment of emotion has gone by. For my part, I hope that if the reader thinks of Count Mosca, he will find nothing to reject.

(4) I shall have Rassi and Riscara appear in the foyer of the Opera, having been sent to Paris as spies after Waterloo by Ernest IV. Fabrice, returning from Amiens, will notice their Italian look and their "thick" Milanese, which these observers suppose nobody can understand. Everybody tells me that one must introduce one's characters. I shall devote much less space to the good Abbé Blanès. I thought it was necessary to have characters who took no part in the action but simply touched the reader's soul and removed the sense of romanticism.

I shall seem to you a monster of conceit. Our great academicians would

have had the public raving about their writings, if they had been born in 1780. Their hopes of greatness depended upon the ancien régime.

As half-fools become more and more numerous, the part played by *form* diminishes. If the *Chartreuse* had been translated into French by Mme. Sand, she would have had some success, but to express what is told in the two present volumes she would have needed three or four. Carefully weigh this excuse.

The half-fool cleaves especially to the verse of Racine, for he can tell when a line is not finished; but Racine's versification daily becomes a smaller part of his merit. The public, as it grows more numerous and less sheep-like, calls for a greater number of "little true touches" concerning a passion, a situation taken from life, etc. We know to how great an extent Voltaire, Racine, etc.—indeed, all except Corneille—are compelled to write lines "padded" for the sake of rhyme. Well, these lines occupy the place that was legitimately owed to such little true touches.

In fifty years M. Bignon, and the Bignons of prose, will have bored everyone so much with productions devoid of any merit except elegance that the half-fools will be in a quandary. Since their vanity will insist that they continue to talk about literature and make a show of being able to think, what will become of them when they can no longer cling to form? They will end by making a god of Voltaire. Wit endures only two hundred years: in 1978 Voltaire will be Voiture; but *Le Père Goriot* will always be *Le Père Goriot*. Perhaps the half-fools will be so upset at no longer having their beloved rules to admire that they will conceive a distaste for literature and turn religious. Since all the rogues of politics have the declamatory and eloquent tone, people in 1880 will be disgusted with it. Then perhaps they will read the *Chartreuse*.

The part played by "*form*" becomes daily more meagre. Think of Hume: imagine a history of France, from 1780 to 1840, written with Hume's good

sense. People would read it even if it were written in patois: in fact, it would be written like the Civil Code. I shall correct the style of the *Chartreuse*, since it offends you, but I shall have great difficulty. I do not admire the style now in fashion, I am out of patience with it. I am confronted with Claudians, Senecas, Ausoniuses. I have been told for the past year that I must sometimes give the reader a rest by describing landscape, clothes, etc. Such descriptions have bored me so much when written by others! But I shall try.

As for contemporary success, of which I should never have dreamed but for the *Revue Parisienne*, I told myself at least fifteen years ago that. I would become a candidate for the Académie if I won the hand of Mlle Bertin, who would have had my praises sung thrice a week. When society is no longer "spotted" with vulgar newly-rich, who value nobility above all else, precisely because they themselves are ignoble, it will no longer be on its knees before the journal of the aristocracy. Before 1793, good society was the true judge of books; now it is dreaming of the return of '93, it is afraid, it is no longer a judge. Take a look at the catalogue of a little bookshop near Saint-Thomas d'Aquin (rue du Bac, about no. 110), a catalogue which it lends to the neighbouring nobility. It is the most convincing argument I know of the impossibility of finding favour with these poltroons numbed by idleness.

I have nowhere portrayed Herr von Metternich, whom I have not seen since I saw him in 1810 at Saint-Cloud, when he wore a bracelet of the hair of Caroline Murat, who at that time was so beautiful. I never regret what was fated not to happen. I am a fatalist, and I hide it. I dream that perhaps I shall have some success about 1860 or '80. By then there will be little talk of Herr von Metternich, and still less of the small prince. Who was Prime Minister in England at the time of Malherbe? Unless by any chance his name was Cromwell, I am at a loss for an answer….

I take a character well known to me, I leave him with the habits he has contracted in the art of going off every morning in pursuit of pleasure, and

next I give him more wit.…

Your amazing article, such as no writer has ever received from another, caused me—I now dare to confess it—to burst into laughter as I read it, whenever I came upon a somewhat excessive piece of praise, which I did at every step. I could imagine the faces my friends would pull as they read it.

Extract from a letter to Honoré de Balzac, October 16, 1840, in *To the Happy Few: Selected Letters of Stendhal*, translated by Norman Cameron, 1952. Reprint by Hyperion Press, Inc., 1979.